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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, we just managed to dodge a bullet with the weather, at least in my immediate area. Cities and towns all around us have just gone through a blast of freezing rain and snow - knocking out power and causing all kinds of problems. For us, just plenty of rain!

I'm so tempted to go off on the current state of national affairs, and the ever-increasing "bailout" plans. Do we, or don't we bail out the automakers? I really don't know if it's a good idea or not, but I'm leaning toward not. The arrogance of this industry's management really ticks me off, but there's obviously more to it than that. But how much can we keep doing - who will be next? And when and how does all of this help the average working stiff, like you and me? Where is our bailout package? Yeah, that's what I thought!

The latest on our "son's" saga... After a lot of deliberation and emotional thoughts, we moved beyond the emotions to make some decisions that we think will be in the best interest of our guy. Because of the location of the cancerous tumor in his lung, pressing against his heart, we want to do what we can to alleviate that stress on him, both physically and mentally. So, we've opted to move forward and put him through some more testing - another ultrasound and a CT scan to determine where exactly the tumor is situated, and whether or not the cancer has spread. If we're "lucky" and the cancer is localized, we'll have the surgery to remove the tumor so his breathing will improve, and the coughing bouts will end. We were told that he should be strong enough to manage the surgery, so we'll probably opt for that. After that, we'll discuss the rest of the options and decide what is next. We're not sure we want him to have to deal with chemotherapy, but we haven't ruled anything out just yet. We want to do whatever we can to make him comfortable, with the least amount of stress. So, the testing is Monday, and we'll go from there.

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. Another week has come and gone, and there's lots of interesting stuff going on out there for us to scratch our heads over.

Not in the Atari world, of course, but hey, ya can't have everything, ya know?

I'm always amazed when people are amazed because of a greedy politician. Be they from Chicago or Waterbury, some places just seem to draw most of the seven deadly sins like magnets.

It's been pointed out that the vast majority of 'Chicago politicians' are hard-working, honest folk who have the welfare of the city, state and/or country in mind, and that it's the minority who are 'crooked'. Somehow, I don't find that comforting.

Then there's the economy. The auto makers are lining up to get a piece of the pie before Uncle Sam stops paying off. Some people have told me that it's really unfair to blame the auto execs for things they couldn't possibly have foreseen, and I tend to agree with that. BUT... what could they not have foreseen? The fact that the higher-profit SUVs they love to sell were gas hounds that would quickly fall out of favor if gas prices rose? (and, given that we've had two oil men running the country for the past 8 years, who could have seen OIL prices going up?)

Let's face it: Detroit has been engineering its own demise for more than a decade now. The fact that petroleum is a finite resource has been accepted since the gas shortages of the 70's.

Remember the cars that they came out with back then when there was rationing and high prices? They came out with smaller, more efficient cars that people could afford. But after that crisis was 'over', they not only went back to their old ways, but flaunted it as if the ability to over-pay for a gas-guzzler were a status symbol.

Many many moons ago, I bought a car... I'm not going to mention the make or model, but it was a carbureted 4 cylinder 1.6 liter engine. The next car I bought boasted better fuel efficiency because it was fuel-injected. It had a 1.4 liter engine instead of 1.6, and had more power to boot. One would think that the auto makers and auto purchasers would have seen the virtue of this and continued the trend, finding more and more ways to be more efficient.

But noooooo, they wanted to make it sexy. Engine sizes went back up, efficiency went down, and the whole fuel shortage thing got swept under the carpet.

The next car I bought (my current one), still has a fuel-injected engine, but it's a 1.8 liter model. I guess the extra 0.4 liters of displacement were necessary to give the car more power after they did everything they could to make it less efficient, and the extra displacement itself also contributed to making everything less efficient. But, you know, "That's what people want".

Well, after that came the feeling of entitlement with half-ton trucks that were more showpieces than hard working trucks. And, of course, efficiency suffered.

But more and more people wanted 'cross-over' vehicles that they could cart their post-classical neo-yuppie larvae in and complain about what they cost and what it cost to fill them up. Just another facet of our lives screamed out for validation... the right to complain about spending money we didn't have on things we didn't need to impress people we didn't care about.

So there you have it. The manufacturers, despite knowing the ruin that lay in that direction, gave the public what they wanted.

The public is now paying for their folly, the government is seeing to that... there's no talk about a multi-billion dollar bail-out for Joe DumbAss, is there? Let's see... at 700 billion dollars doled out to the approximately 305 million people in this country, that'd be.... just under \$2,300.00 for every man, woman and child in the country.

I haven't heard any talk about THAT, have you? Why not give the money to the people who are going to be doing the spending. The last "stimulus check", according to pollsters, went to pay down debt anyway... that's a good thing.. Spending money in that way would probably help the banking industry, albeit not in the way they want. And that stimulus check was... what? A maximum of \$1,200.00 PER HOUSEHOLD? Hmmm 12 hundred bucks PER HOUSEHOLD versus 23 hundred PER PERSON... Hmmm... which would you think would be more of a stimulus? Me too.

Of course we can't allow the auto industry to fail... it'd be damaging not only to our economy, but to our entire way of life for decades to come. But I simply can't countenance giving money in any way, shape or form, to the industry raiders who helped cause the problem in the first place.

If you're going to bail out someone, and are considering bailing out the industry that caused much of the problem with their own short-sightedness, why not go RIGHT to the source and give the money to the people who bought the cars they wanted the industry to make?

Okay, okay, that's enough of that. Let's get to the news, hints, tips and info from the UseNet.

From the comp.sys.atari.st NewsGroup

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Guillaume Tello asks about a 32 Mb TT RAM board:

"I have received this:

<http://pagesperso-orange.fr/gtello/new.htm>

Does someone know if this can be modified to get 64Mb or more?"

Jo Even Skarstein tells Guillaume:

"I'm on thin ice here, but I don't think you can. If I remember correctly, there was a successor to the Mighty Mic 32 that was limited to 64Mb."

Guillaume now posts this about his earlier question about the differences between the NOVA and NOVA PLUS cards:

"I have the answer now: The NOVA is limited to 32k colors and the SuperNOVA can go up to 24 bits or 32 bits resolutions (800x600x32b requires 2Mb of VRAM)

Pretty cool. First impression and tests: the drivers have been improved in speed and the TT with SuperNOVA is as fast as my other TT with Nova and Cattamaran (concerning GEM/VDI calls)."

Edward Baiz tells Guillaume:

"The Nova Plus card I had for my Hades060 was upgradeable to 4meg of video ram."

Phantommm asks about software he's accumulated:

"I've a few projects that I've been working on, and after going thru some boxes, I have located my fairly large Atari software collection. A lot of Atari ST/E related software on disks already in the .ST file format. Many of these programs especially the games have been cracked and have nice demos, intros and etc that run before the games loads up or at the title screen.

A lot of effort went into doing these and I must have several thousand files in the .ST format. (I've collected this stuff for years)

Is there enough interest in these files for me to create a few CDs and make available?

Or should I just leave them in the boxes?

Many are games, but also have a lot of apps/utilities/fonts/text files and etc. These are from the 80s and early 90s."

Dennis Schulmeister tells Phantommm:

"Me, I'd love buying one of those discs."

Ggnukua adds:

"You can also upload the disks somewhere (newsgroups, file sharing sites etc) if you can be arsed."

I think... I HOPE he meant "ARCD". [grin]

PPera adds:

"There is already a lot of SW downloadable on WEB. Practically all menu disks (games with intros, apps) and programs separately. For instance on planetemu.net . Some CDs, DVDs are still available too.

Of course, there is always interest for good stuff, especially if it can not find easy. It would be good if you make some list before writing CD, DVD. Best if you post about this on Atari forum:
<http://www.atari-forum.com/index.php>"

"Fair enough, I'll go ahead and put 'em on CDs and make a list available for comment."

This way at least, the files will be on a safer media. It will take some time however. Even though most are already in the .ST format, the sheer number of disks to copy over and sort makes it a huge task."

Well folks, that's it for this time around. I know it's short, but there were a grand total of 10 usable messages in the Newsgroup this week... This WEEK! I can remember when each Atari NewsGroup got that many messages in half an hour! Ahhhh... those were the days, huh?

Well, they're gone now, and there's no use crying over spilled bits, ey?

I guess all you can really do is tune in again next week, same time, same station, and be ready to listen to what they were saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section - Videogames Not Just for Kids!
    """"""""""
                                Midway Sold for $100,000!
                                PlayStation Home Service Launched!
                                And much more!
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->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Midway Sold for \$100,000

Reuters is reporting that media mogul Sumner Redstone of Redstone's National Amusements Inc has sold his controlling stake of Midway Games Inc. to private investor Mark Thomas for roughly \$100,000, or \$0.0012 per share. Thomas will assume \$70 million of senior secured and unsecured debt.

Redstone's National Amusements Inc is expected to announce on Monday that it sold the 87 percent stake to investor Mark Thomas, the Journal said.

Thomas has agreed to pay about \$100,000, or \$0.0012 a share, for the Midway stake and will assume \$70 million of senior secured and unsecured debt. Thomas has no prior relationship with Midway Games, the paper said.

The sale amounts to a significant loss on Redstone's investment but secures a hefty tax benefit as he negotiates other asset sales, the paper said.

National Amusements has about \$1.6 billion in debt outstanding. Half of that will need to be repaid by year-end.

The long-term future of Midway Games Inc. remains hanging in the balance.

Uh-Oh: Nintendo Wii Shortages Looming, Again

Yes, three holiday seasons later it may still be a challenge for gift givers to find a Wii.

Nintendo of America vice president of corporate affairs Denise Kaigler told the Industry Standard (via email), "It's true that despite this amazing amount of product we're putting into the channel, some locations around the country are still experiencing sellouts. There's no way to know if we'll have enough Wii consoles for the holidays."

Should shortages mount it won't be for a lack of production effort on Nintendo's part. Kaigler said, "Nintendo now manufactures Wii consoles at a rate of 2.4 million a month worldwide." She also noted that they have put half again as many Wiis on U.S. shelves this holiday season than last. Kaigler recommended that if you think you want one and see it in a store then you should buy it then because, as she said, "it might not be on that shelf much longer."

Reports prior to Black Friday noted ample supplies in stock with some stores boasting castles built from the stacks of machines they had on hand. But a quick check around online today showed GameStop, Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target, and Amazon proper out of stock currently, with prices starting at \$338 from secondary sellers on Amazon for new units. As Christmas draws closer and shopping takes on a more frenzied pace don't be surprised to see people feverishly looking for Wiis once again, accompanied by skyrocketing prices.

Videogames Not Just for Kids

Videogames are not just for kids. A new survey out on Sunday found that more than half of American adults aged 18 and older play videogames, and that about one out of five play every day or almost every day.

According to the survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project of the Washington-based Pew Research Center, 53 percent of American adults aged 18 or older play videogames although the number decreases significantly with age.

Eighty-one percent of Americans aged between 18 and 29 play videogames, 60 percent of those aged between 30 and 49, 40 percent of those aged between 50 and 64 and just 23 percent of those aged 65 and older, the survey found.

Twenty-one percent of those surveyed said they play videogames every day or almost every day.

The survey found that while a substantial number of adults play videogames many more teenagers are gamers. A total of 97 percent of the teenagers surveyed said they play videogames.

Men are more likely than women to play videogames, according to Pew, by 55 percent to 50 percent respectively.

Education level is a predictor of videogame play with 57 percent of those with at least some college education playing games, 51 percent of high school graduates and 40 percent of those with less than a high school education.

For the study, videogame playing was defined as game-playing online, on a desktop or laptop computer, a game console, a cellphone, a handheld organizer or a portable gaming device.

Computers are the most popular equipment for adults who play videogames with 38 percent saying they play games on desktop or laptop computers.

Twenty-eight percent play on game consoles like the Xbox, PlayStation or the Wii, 18 percent on cellphones or handheld organizers and 13 percent on portable gaming devices.

Teenagers were much more likely to play videogames on game consoles with 89 percent saying they used consoles to play games.

Internet users were significantly more likely to play games than those who are not online, the study found, with 64 percent of Web users playing games compared with just 20 percent of non-Internet users.

Parents are more likely to play videogames than non-parents with 66 percent of parents or guardians of children 17 years old or younger playing games compared with 47 percents of adults who are not parents.

Teenagers are much more likely than adults to play games online with 76 percent of all teens saying they play games online compared with just 23 percent of all adults.

Pew said the data on teenagers was based on a survey of 1,102 teens conducted between November 2007 and February 2008.

The data on adults was based on surveys of between 1,063 and 2,054 adults between October 2007 and December 2007. The various surveys had margins of error of between plus or minus two percent and plus or minus three percent.

PlayStation Home Service Launches Thursday

It's been so long since the wraps were taken off PlayStation Home at

GDC 2007 that at times it's been easy to forget that it exists. It definitely does though, and in a couple days it'll finally be in the hands of American and European PlayStation 3 owners everywhere.

Sony has announced that the wait will end December 11, with Home becoming a free download that will launch directly from the PSN column on the XMB. Those living in North America will get access to previously announced virtual environments from Uncharted: Drake's Fortune and Far Cry 2, with Resistance, Warhawk, Guitar Hero and SOCOM spaces coming at a later date.

Basic features will be free, but customized furniture as well as designer clothes for avatars will be available for a small fee thanks to partnerships with furniture and fashion designers Lignet Roset and Diesel. So if you're looking for your avatar to look like someone out of Project Runway, this is your big chance.

Other features include promotional materials from Sony Pictures films and "consumer brand spaces" such as Red Bull Island that feature various sponsored events. Users will also have the ability to create clubs to meet others who share their interests, again for a small fee.

According to Sony, the release is still an open beta, and will "continue to evolve with new features and functionality." But then, Gmail is apparently still in beta as well, so take that label for what you will. All that matters is that it's finally coming to the public at large. Hopefully it will have indeed been worth the wait.

Atari Blasts Back from the Past with New Game Plan

For many gamers Atari is a blast from the past or just a logo on retro T-shirts but the company that dates back 36 years is looking to reclaim a stake of the video game landscape.

Atari Inc., founded by Nolan Bushnell, launched the first truly successful video game "Pong" in 1972 but has struggled in recent years with lackluster games like "Jenga World Tour" and "Godzilla Unleashed."

But a change in ownership this year aims to reinvigorate the company. French game publisher Infogrames had owned a majority stake in Atari since 2000 but acquired the rest of Atari this year and has assumed its name.

New Atari President Phil Harrison, who helped build Sony Worldwide Studios into a leading game development factory, said it's now up to the game maker to build the products and services that do the well-known Atari brand justice.

"Having a cool logo and a brand that's known throughout the world is great, but unless it stands for something and actually resonates with our players by delivering great value, fun gameplay, and entertainment, it doesn't mean anything," he said.

Analysts said Atari had an interesting but checkered past which could makes some consumers - and investors - wary of its bid to get back on top of the game.

"The Atari name will always mean 'old school cool' to gamers, but the brand may need some rehab to regain respect," said Billy Pidgeon, videogame analyst at IDC.

Atari used London's O2 Arena to showcase 14 games heading to stores in 2009, most of which will ship in the first six months.

For the more hardcore gamers, Atari will bring developer CD Projekt RED's "The Witcher: Rise of the White Wolf," a fantasy role-playing game, to PlayStation 3 and Xbox 360 in autumn 2009. Atari will also handle retail distribution of CCP Games' "EVE Online," which gets a global release March 10.

The company is also reviving the arcade boxing game "Ready 2 Rumble Revolution" on Wii next year.

Having worked with Hollywood on games like Shiny Entertainment's "Enter the Matrix" and Atari Los Angeles' "Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines," the company also plans to use a pair of established movie brands to widen its audience.

"Ghostbusters: The Videogame" ships in June as the Sony Pictures film marks its 25th anniversary and plays like an interactive third film in the franchise with the cast involved.

Atari is bringing a virtual Vin Diesel to Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 in the spring in "Chronicles of Riddick: Assault on Dark Athena," a shooter that further explores the back story of Riddick from the films "Pitch Black" and "Chronicles of Riddick."

Just this week, Atari acquired California-based Cryptic Studios for \$28 million (plus the potential for another \$20 million in bonus payments), a developer that produces massively multiplayer online (MMO) games.

Harrison said he believes the future of gaming is online.

Atari will publish Cryptic's three upcoming games in 2009, 2010 and 2011 with the first out the gate the comic book heroes and villains of "Champions Online," followed by "Star Trek Online" in 2010 and an unannounced MMO game for 2011.

With its early slate now set, and new internal game development under way at its new London studio and its established Eden Studio in Lyon, France, Atari's management now has to deliver on its promise of better quality games.

"I think Phil Harrison and Paulina Bozek (head of Atari's London Studio) will be instrumental in building a mass market library, which will help the publisher compete in today's market," said Pidgeon.

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Report Recommends National Office for Cyberspace

The Commission on Cyber Security for the 44th Presidency released a report Monday on Internet security with recommendations. The focus of the commission, part of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, is to provide President-Elect Barack Obama's administration with insight on cybercriminal activities.

In recent years U.S. agencies, including the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security, have experienced computer break-ins.

The commission was established in August 2007 to plan policy changes for the new administration. It has made more than two dozen recommendations to the Obama administration, including creating a new office for cyberspace. To create the office, it recommends merging the National Cyber Security Center and the Joint Interagency Task Force.

"We will never be fully secure in cyberspace, but much can be done to reduce risk, increase resiliency, and gain new strengths," the commission's report says. "We believe that the next administration can improve the security situation in relatively short order."

The commission, which met four times and had 30 briefings with government officials and private-sector experts, said the cyberspace war has begun and recommended that the proposed National Office for Cyberspace assume authority.

A Center for Cyber Security Operations was also proposed. The CCSO would be a nonprofit group of public and private agencies collaborating on security matters.

Security experts, including Microsoft's Paul Nicholas and McAfee's Dan Hickey, and research scientists, including Jim Gosler of Sandia National Laboratories and Clint Kreitner, president of the Center for Internet Security, advised the commission.

It's likely this will be the first step in the Bush administration's \$15 billion cybersecurity initiative.

The National Office for Cyberspace would have authority to revise the Federal Information Security Management Act, oversee the Trusted Internet Connection initiative and the Federal Desktop Core Configuration, and require agencies to submit budget proposals relating to cyberspace before submission to the Office of Management and Budget.

The 25 listed recommendations also include creation of three public-private advisory groups, reforming the National Information Assurance Policy, and increasing the use of secure Internet protocols. Another recommendation includes increasing cybersecurity research funding, currently set at \$300 million for fiscal year 2009.

"The next administration has an opportunity to improve the situation; we hope these recommendations can contribute to that effort and its success," the report says.

White House Opposes FCC's Free Internet Plan

The Bush administration opposes a Federal Communications Commission plan for free, nationwide wireless Internet access, according to a report Wednesday by The Wall Street Journal.

The FCC has been considering auctioning 25 megahertz of spectrum in the 2155MHz to 2180MHz band. As part of the rules for using the spectrum, the FCC plans to require license holders to offer some free wireless broadband service.

The FCC sees the idea, which is based on a proposal submitted to the FCC by M2Z Networks in 2006, as a way to provide broadband Internet service to millions of Americans who either can't afford or don't want to pay for high-speed Internet access.

However, in a letter sent to FCC Chairman Kevin Martin on Wednesday, Commerce Secretary Carlos Gutierrez expressed the administration's opposition to the idea, which could be voted on as early as next week, according to the report.

"The administration believes that the (airwaves) should be auctioned without price or product mandate," Gutierrez wrote, according to the Journal's report. "The history of FCC spectrum auctions has shown that the potential for problems increases in instances where licensing is overly prescriptive or designed around unproven business models."

An FCC spokesman told the newspaper that it had received Gutierrez's letter and was reviewing it.

"We agree that market forces should help drive competition but we also believe that providing free basic broadband to consumers is a good thing," the spokesman told the Journal.

The FCC essentially threw its support behind the idea in October with the release of an engineering report that dismissed concerns about interference for existing providers.

Existing providers like T-Mobile USA, which spent \$4.2 billion in 2006 acquiring spectrum in an adjacent band, said that opening up this spectrum would cause interference and disrupt service.

The report, however, concluded that spectrum could be used as planned "without a significant risk of harmful interference."

Obama Urged To Create Post To Protect Children Online

A group which promotes online safety for children urged US president-elect Barack Obama on Thursday to create a post of "National Safety Officer" to protect minors on the Internet.

The Family Online Safety Institute (FOSI) made the recommendation in a report, "Making Wise Choices Online," released at its Second Annual Online Safety Conference held in Washington on Thursday.

Besides creating a post of National Safety Officer, the FOSI also called

for the creation of a US Council for Internet Safety and an Online Safety Program to fund research, educational and awareness-raising projects.

It said the post of National Safety Officer should be set up within the office of the Chief Technology Officer, a position which Obama has pledged to create in his administration which takes power on January 20.

"We need a paradigm shift in what we do, say and teach about online safety," said FOSI chief executive Stephen Balkam.

"We look to the next administration to provide leadership and support at the highest levels to help make the online world a safer place for children."

Members of FOSI include such Internet powerhouses as AOL, Google, Microsoft and MySpace.

The group works to protect children from online harassment, cyberbullying, sexual predators and other threats.

Web Site-Based Crimeware Hits All-Time High

The use of malware on Web sites to steal passwords and other sensitive information is skyrocketing, according to a new report from the Anti-Phishing Working Group.

The number of URLs with hidden code for stealing passwords nearly tripled between July 2007 and July 2008, to a record high of 9,529, while the number of malicious-application variants hit a high of 442 this May, the APWG reports in its quarterly report (PDF) issued this week.

The increase is primarily due to malicious code being used in SQL injection attacks, in which a small malicious script is inserted into a database that feeds information to the Web site. Typically, the host site is legitimate such as BusinessWeek's, not a phishing site created for the sole purpose of stealing consumer data.

The financial-services industry is the most targeted sector for phishing attacks, followed by those focusing on auctions and payment services, the report found.

"Cybercriminals continue to increase their activities to levels never before seen in the five years since the APWG has been monitoring phishing and crimeware," APWG Chairman Dave Jevans said in a statement.

The recession is prompting even more malicious activity online, he said.

"The current financial crisis has also been used by phishers to create new scams that try to scare consumers into entering their usernames and passwords into sites that mimic those of well-known distressed financial institutions," Jevans said. "As the economy degrades, we are seeing a continual increase in malicious and criminal activity on the Internet."

Another report issued this week shows that IT security professionals view cybercrime and data breaches as the top security risks, followed by

mobility, outsourcing, cloud computing, mobile devices, peer-to-peer file sharing, Web 2.0 services, and malware.

Meanwhile, respondents who work in IT operations listed outsourcing as the biggest risk, followed by mobile devices and cybercrime, in the 2008 Security Mega Trends Survey conducted by The Ponemon Institute on behalf of Lumension Security. In the survey, 577 respondents work in IT security, and 825 work in IT operations.

Of those surveyed, 83 percent of the IT security workers and 79 percent of IT operations professionals reported that their organization had a data breach due to customer or employee information being lost or stolen. Overall, 92 percent of the organizations have experienced a cyberattack.

Another survey, released on Thursday by CA, looks at behaviors and perceptions among American adults and teens of their safety online.

Fifty-seven percent of adults fear that they may become victims of identity fraud online within the next two years, and 90 percent worry about the security of their personal data. Meanwhile, 35 percent of teens leave their social-networking profiles open to viewing by strangers, 38 percent post their education information, 32 percent disclose their e-mail addresses, and 28 percent reveal their birth date.

Laptop Searches at Border Might Get Restricted

Mohamed Shommo, an engineer for Cisco Systems Inc., travels overseas several times a year for work, so he is accustomed to opening his bags for border inspections upon returning to the U.S. But in recent years, these inspections have gone much deeper than his luggage.

Border agents have scrutinized family pictures on Shommo's digital camera, examined Koranic verses and other audio files on his iPod and even looked up Google keyword searches he had typed into his company laptop.

"They literally searched everywhere and every device they could," said Shommo, who now minimizes what he takes on international trips and deletes pictures off his camera before returning to the U.S. "I don't think anyone has a right to look at my private belongings without my permission. You never know how they will interpret what they find."

Given all the personal details that people store on digital devices, border searches of laptops and other gadgets can give law enforcement officials far more revealing pictures of travelers than suitcase inspections might yield. That has set off alarms among civil liberties groups and travelers' advocates - and now among some members of Congress who hope to impose restrictions on the practice next year.

They fear the government has crossed a sacred line by rummaging through electronic contact lists and confidential e-mail messages, trade secrets and proprietary business files, financial and medical records and other deeply private information.

These searches, opponents say, threaten Fourth Amendment safeguards against unreasonable search and seizure and could chill free expression and other activities protected by the First Amendment. What's more, they

warn, such searches raise concerns about ethnic and religious profiling since the targets often are Muslims, including U.S. citizens and permanent residents.

"I feel like I don't have any privacy," said Shommo, a native of Sudan who has been in the U.S. for more than a decade and plans to apply for citizenship next year. "I don't feel treated equally to everybody else. I feel discriminated against."

Customs and Border Protection, part of the Department of Homeland Security, asserts that it has constitutional authority to conduct routine searches at the border - without suspicion of wrongdoing - to prevent dangerous people and property from entering the country. This authority, the government maintains, applies not only to suitcases and bags, but also to books, documents and other printed materials - as well as to electronic devices.

Such searches, the government notes, have uncovered everything from martyrdom videos and other violent jihadist materials to child pornography and stolen intellectual property.

While Homeland Security points out that these procedures predate the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, civil liberties groups have seen an uptick in complaints about border searches of electronic devices in the past two years, according to Shirin Sinnar, staff attorney at the Asian Law Caucus. In some cases, travelers suspected border agents were copying their files after taking their laptops and cell phones away for anywhere from a few minutes to a few weeks or longer.

Such inspections appear to amount to "a fishing expedition" by border agents, said Farhana Khera, executive director of Muslim Advocates.

These objections led the Asian Law Caucus and the Electronic Frontier Foundation to file a Freedom of Information request to obtain the federal policy on border searches of electronic devices. When the government failed to respond, the groups filed a lawsuit this year. And lawmakers began demanding answers.

So in July, amid the mounting outside pressure, Homeland Security released a formal policy stating that federal agents can search documents and electronic devices at the border without suspicion. The procedures also allow border agents to detain documents and devices for "a reasonable period of time" to perform a thorough search "on-site or at an off-site location."

The problem with this policy, argues Marcia Hofmann, staff attorney with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, is that the contents of a laptop or other digital device are fundamentally different than those of a typical suitcase.

As Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who is co-sponsoring one of several bills in Congress that would restrict such searches, put it: "You can't put your life in a suitcase, but you can put your life on a computer."

Susan Gurley, executive director of the Association of Corporate Travel Executives, which filed its own Freedom of Information request to obtain the government's laptop search policy, noted that border searches pose a particular concern for international business travelers. That's because they often carry sensitive corporate information on their laptops and don't have the option of leaving their computers at home.

And for many travelers, the concerns go beyond their own privacy or the privacy of their employers. Lawyers may have documents subject to attorney-client privilege. Doctors may be carrying patient records.

Tahir Anwar is an imam at a mosque in San Jose, Calif., so his laptop and iPhone contain confidential information about the mosque's members, including their personal e-mail messages.

Anwar has traveled abroad 12 times over the past 2 1/2 years and he has been detained upon returning to the U.S. every time. Border agents have searched his laptop and once took away his cell phone for 15 minutes.

Now when Anwar travels, he simply leaves his laptop behind and deletes e-mail off his iPhone before crossing the border, synching it back up with his computer after he gets home.

"People tell me their innermost secrets," Anwar said. "I tell people to e-mail me, so a lot of personal information is in my e-mail. If people find out that this information is being looked at, I can't serve my purpose and people won't come to me."

For its part, the government argues that some of the most dangerous contraband is transported in digital form today - making searches of electronic devices a crucial law enforcement tool.

Among the successful searches the government cites from recent years: In 2006, a man arriving from the Netherlands at the Minneapolis airport had digital pictures of high-level Al-Qaida officials, and video clips of improvised explosive devices being detonated and of the man reading his will. The man was convicted of visa fraud and removed from the country.

"To treat digital media at the international border differently than Customs and Border Protection has treated documents and other conveyances historically would provide a great advantage to terrorists and others who seek to do us harm," Jayson Ahern, the agency's deputy commissioner, said in a statement submitted to the Senate Judiciary subcommittee on the Constitution in June. Homeland Security did not send anyone to testify.

Amy Kudwa, a spokeswoman for the department, also stressed that a tiny fraction of 1 percent of all travelers are singled out for laptop searches at the border. She added that Homeland Security does not profile based on religion, race, ethnicity or any other criteria in conducting such searches.

So far, only a handful of court cases have addressed the issue.

Federal appeals courts in two circuits have upheld warrantless or "suspicionless" computer searches at the border that turned up images of child pornography used as evidence in criminal cases.

But late last year, a U.S. magistrate judge in Vermont ruled that the government could not force a man to divulge the password to his laptop after a search at the Canadian border found child pornography. The U.S. Attorney's Office in Vermont is appealing the decision to the U.S. district court.

Now Congress is getting involved. A handful of bills have been introduced that could pass next year.

One measure, sponsored by Sen. Russell Feingold, D-Wis., chairman of the Constitution subcommittee, would require reasonable suspicion of illegal activity to search the contents of electronic devices carried by U.S. citizens and legal residents. It would also require probable cause and a warrant or court order to detain a device for more than 24 hours.

And it would prohibit profiling of travelers based on race, ethnicity, religion or national origin.

Rep. Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., is sponsoring a bill in the House that would also require suspicion to inspect electronic devices. Engel said he is not trying to impede legitimate searches to protect national security. But, he said, it is just as important to protect civil liberties.

"It's outrageous that on a whim, a border agent can just ask you for your laptop," Engel said. "We can't just throw our constitutional rights out the window."

Google Releases Finished Version of Chrome Browser

Google yanked the "beta" test label off Chrome, quickly putting a stamp of approval on its Web browser released in a direct challenge to Microsoft's ubiquitous Internet Explorer.

The California online search titan - known for leaving new software offerings in beta, or test, modes for what seems like ages - says Chrome proved its merits, and in a relatively brief 100 days.

Google's free web-based Gmail service still bears a "beta" label even though it was launched nearly five years ago.

Chrome has gone through 15 iterations since its launch with fixes and modifications engineered based on feedback from some of the more than 10 million people worldwide that have started using the browser.

"We're excited to announce that with today's 50th release we are taking off the 'beta' label," Google engineering director Linus Upson and product management vice president Sundar Pichai wrote in an online posting.

"We have removed the beta label as our goals for stability and performance have been met but our work is far from done."

Improvements which users called for, and reportedly got, include better video viewing, faster data loading, and strict privacy and security controls.

Google and Microsoft have been in an escalating war, with the Redmond, Washington-based software goliath striving to unseat Google as king of Internet search and advertising.

Google, meanwhile, is striking at the heart of Microsoft's empire by offering software free online as services supported by advertising.

Firefox 3.1 Beta 2 Available with New Features

Mozilla has quietly rolled out its second beta download of the next-generation Firefox Web browser, code-named Shiretoko. Firefox 3.1 Beta 2 is a public preview release primarily intended for developer testing and community feedback.

Firefox 3.1 Beta 2 is available for download in 54 languages. Though the software's developers consider their latest public release to be stable, they said users of Firefox 3.0 should not expect all their browser plug-ins to work properly with Firefox 3.1 Beta 2.

The latest Firefox milestone is focused on testing core functionality, noted Mike Beltzner, director for Mozilla Firefox. "It includes many new features as well as improvements to performance, Web compatibility, and speed," he said.

Just like the alpha release of the Opera 10 browser, Firefox 3.1 Beta 2 lets Web site designers link their pages to downloadable fonts to display Unicode characters not otherwise supported and to render sites more precisely. Additionally, the Beta 2 release now supports Canvas shadow effects.

Other notable Beta 2 improvements include the default use of a considerably faster Tracemonkey JavaScript engine, the addition of speculative parsing to the Gecko 1.9.1 layout engine to speed up content rendering, and support for new Web technologies such as the W3C Geolocation API. However, Firefox 3.1 Beta 2's main claim to fame comes from its incorporation of slick privacy browsing.

"Private browsing is not a tool to keep you anonymous from Web sites or your ISP, or, for example, protect you from all kinds of spyware applications which use sophisticated techniques to intercept your online traffic," said developer Ehsan Akhgari. "Private browsing is only about making sure that Firefox doesn't store any data which can be used to trace your online activities - no more, no less."

Up to now, Firefox users who want to cover their Web-surfing tracks have had to periodically clear the data that the browser normally stores, such as history, cookies and cache. "The problem is that this action will also remove the parts of your online activities data which you don't want to hide, so the history that Firefox records can no longer be used to find a Web site you had visited a month before," Akhgari observed.

And that's where Beta 2's private browsing comes in handy. To access this stealth surfing feature, select Private Browsing from the Tools menu and click on the Start Private Browsing button. A regular browsing session is temporarily closed and a private session opens in a new window.

"At this stage, you can start browsing Web sites without ever having to worry that Firefox might store something on your computer which can be used to tell which pages you have visited," Akhgari said.

To stop private browsing, open the Tools menu and unselect Private Browsing. "This action discards all of the data from your private session, and will restore your non-private browsing session, just like it was before entering the private-browsing mode," Akhgari said.

\$99 (Yes, \$99) Netbook Debuts From Asus, RadioShack

In what may be a sign of things to come, Asus and RadioShack have launched a netbook whose price appears to be subsidized by its 3G provider, AT&T.

The Acer Aspire one netbook is priced at just \$99, but only for customers who sign up for a two-year contract with AT&T, which is providing the wireless data connection for the netbook's integrated 3G connection. AT&T's wireless data plans start at \$60 per month, which means consumers will pay little up front, but \$1,440 over the two-year contract.

The offer is available in 4,400 RadioShack company-operated stores through Dec. 24, RadioShack said.

Although netbooks have been subsidized overseas by wireless carriers, that trend hasn't appeared on U.S. shores. However, Michael Dell reportedly claimed that netbooks would soon be subsidized by wireless carriers, and HP consumer notebook chief Kevin Frost was quoted by The Wall Street Journal, saying the subsidies "were the long-term model".

"Many people internationally are already enjoying the portability, on-the-go connectivity and affordability of this emerging new technology," said Peter Whitsett, RadioShack's executive vice president of merchandising, in a statement. "We are proud to introduce this concept in the U.S. by offering a netbook with integrated 3G functionality in addition to full Wi-Fi capability."

The Windows XP netbook appears to be comparably equipped to some of its competitors. Specifications provided by RadioShack and Asus indicate that the netbook includes an 8.9-inch LCD screen, an Intel Atom processor, a gigabyte of RAM, a 160-Gbyte hard drive, a webcam, a 5-in-1 memory card reader, the AT&T 3G technology, and 802.11b/g Wi-Fi. The netbook weighs 2.44 pounds and measures 9.8 inches wide by 6.7 inches deep and 1.1 inches high, when closed.

Microsoft To Soon Sell Full Range of Web Software

Microsoft Corp will soon launch a full range of online versions of its software products, including the Office suite, and expects the weak economy to accelerate growth of the nascent Web-based software market, a senior executive said on Monday.

Stephen Elop, president of Microsoft's business division, is leading the company's entry into the "software as a service" market, which offers programs that are hosted online instead of downloaded to computer hard drives.

By using the Web to host software like Microsoft Office, as well as Exchange e-mail and SharePoint collaborative software, Microsoft customers do not need to spend as much money on equipment and maintenance of computer servers.

"What we think is in five years, 50 percent of the use of Exchange and

Sharepoint could be serviced from the cloud," Elop told Reuters in an interview.

"Between now and then, a year or two or whatever, if it's going to be tough economic times, that means we expect quite a lot of movement in that direction, a lot of people taking advantage of that," he added. "I think the economy will help it."

Microsoft's foray into online software services comes amid competition from Google Inc, whose Google Apps provide free Web services including calendar, collaboration, email and messaging software.

Redmond, Washington-based Microsoft has said it plans to upgrade its Office business software to include online versions of the popular Word and Excel programs. Elop said the company would soon announce a wide range of services, including free versions supported by advertising.

"We expect fully that the full range of Office utilities, from the most advanced to simpler lightweight versions, will be available with a range of options: ad-funded, subscriptions-based, traditional licensing fees, and so forth. So you should expect to see that full array," he said.

Elop declined to specify when the services would be launched, but said "in 2009 you're going to see a lot of advance in this area."

Microsoft will likely make a profit from the new initiative within a year after the launch, he said.

He also said that even the basic, free versions will trump Google Apps in capabilities, and that Microsoft will ensure that users can move Office documents in and out of the Web browser environment without any garbling to the text.

Microsoft's advantage against Google is its rich set of software services, he said, adding that this is also a benefit as it competes with network equipment maker Cisco Systems Inc, which is also expanding into the Web-based software business.

Elop said recent meetings with customers showed strong interest in upgrading to online software applications, despite worries that a global recession would dampen technology spending.

"We may have underestimated the extent to which customers will move in this direction," he said.

Student Punished for Facebook Rant Against Teacher Sues School

A former Florida high school student disciplined for "cyberbullying" one of her teachers on Facebook has filed a lawsuit against the principal of the school for allegedly violating her freedom of speech.

Katherine Evans, 18, who recently graduated from Pembroke Pines Charter High School north of Miami, is suing principal Peter Bayer for suspending her after she posted negative comments about her English teacher, the Miami Herald reported on Wednesday.

Evans, an honors student, created the Facebook group "Ms. Sarah Phelps

is the worst teacher I've ever met!" in November 2007 featuring a picture of the teacher, and asked her friends to join, the newspaper said.

The three students who joined only did so to praise Phelps and criticize Evans, after which she took down the page from the popular social networking site, it said.

But school authorities got word of the group and suspended Evans for three days for cyberbullying and disruptive behavior. She was also removed from her advanced placement classes.

The lawsuit, filed Monday by the American Civil Liberties Union, does not seek monetary damages but calls on the school to remove the suspension penalty, which "stained (Evans's) academic record and violated her First Amendment rights."

AISD Teacher Throws Fit Over Student's Linux CD

In an age where Windows and OS X reign supreme, it's no wonder that a local AISD middle school teacher became enraged after discovering one of her students distributing what she believed to be bootlegged copies of an operating system in class.

While teacher "Karen" was clearly operating under the assumption that she'd scored a minor victory for the Microsofts and other downtrodden software giants of the world, the particular operating system that she ended up disciplining her student for was a freely distributable version of Linux.

To wit, the following is part of an email that the teacher sent to the person who originally provided said Linux to the student:

...observed one of my students with a group of other children gathered around his laptop. Upon looking at his computer, I saw he was giving a demonstration of some sort. The student was showing the ability of the laptop and handing out Linux disks. After confiscating the disks I called a conference [sic] with the student and that is how I came to discover you and your organization.

Mr. Starks, I am sure you strongly believe in what you are doing but I cannot either support your efforts or allow them to happen in my classroom. At this point, I am not sure what you are doing is legal. No software is free and spreading that misconception is harmful.

These children look up to adults for guidance and discipline. I will research this as time allows and I want to assure you, if you are doing anything illegal, I will pursue charges as the law allows. Mr. Starks, I along with many others tried Linux during college and I assure you, the claims you make are grossly over-stated and hinge on falsehoods. I admire your attempts in getting computers in the hands of disadvantaged people but putting linux on these machines is holding our kids back.

This is a world where Windows runs on virtually every computer, and putting on a carnival show for an operating system is not helping these children at all.

What makes the story especially poignant, besides the teacher's

disparagingly defeatist attitude, is that the copy of Linux was originally provided to this student courtesy of the Austin-based HeliOS Project, which builds and provides Linux computers to disadvantaged or "exceptionally promising" students. It seems that this kid was merely showing his friends, in an albeit super-nerdy fashion, that there existed an alternative to bloated and overpriced operating systems.

Starks responded on the HeliOS blog, saying:

And please...investigate to your heart's content. You are about to have your eyes opened, that is if you actually investigate anything at all. Linux is a free as-in-cost and free as-in-license operating system. It was designed specifically for those purposes. Linux is used to free people from Microsoft. The fact that you seem to believe that Microsoft is the end all and be-all is actually funny in a sad sort of way. Then again, being a good NEA member, you would spout the Union line. Microsoft has pumped tens of millions of dollars into your union. Of course you are going to "recommend" Microsoft Windows". To do otherwise would probably get you reprimanded at the least and fired at the worst. You are only doing what you've been instructed to do.

You've been trained well.

His full response, plus the ensuing comments storm, makes for prime reading. We're hoping that Miss Karen decides to abandon her quixotic quest to "pursue charges as the law allows," because doing otherwise will only subject this state's already-abysmal education system to further ridicule.

Computer Mouse Turns 40

It's hard to believe that the computer mouse is celebrating its 40th birthday today. Honestly, it doesn't look a day over 25.

On this date in 1968, inventor Douglas Engelbart demoed the first mouse at the Fall Joint Computer Conference (FJCC). That mouse was a big wooden box built by Bill English, who would continue to play an important role in the device's evolution.

Visit Gearlog <http://us.rd.yahoo.com/dailynews/zd/tc_zd/storytext/234847/30190740/SIG=1230jlarb/*http://www.gearlog.com/2008/12/40_years_of_the_mouse_a_guided.php#more>, and check out some of the highlights of the mouse's long and colorful career.

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